

FRANK DE LA TORRE

"ALL IN FROM JUMP"

BY CRAIG ROSEN

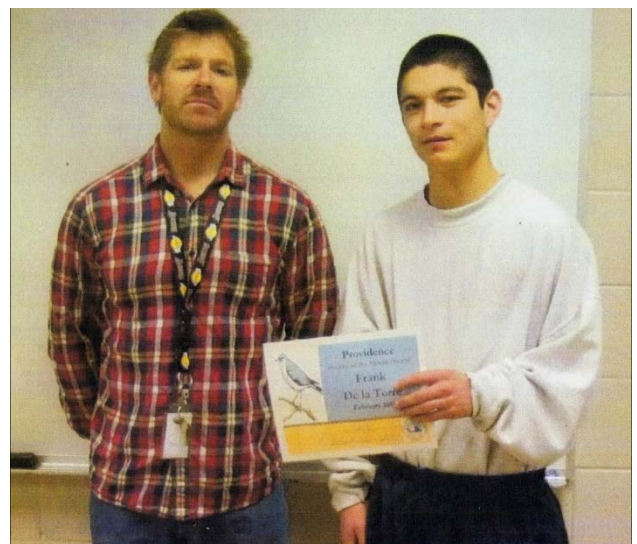
When Frank De La Torre first heard about [California Poetry Out Loud](#) he was eager to compete. He loves to rap and gets the connection to poetry—even the classics, which many kids can't relate to and rarely read or hear. Frankie was all in from jump. His main concern was over his practice space. The only place he could practice would be his room. Why was that a problem? Because his room was a cell.



This sounds like teenage exaggeration, comparing life at home to jail, but Frank De La Torre actually was in jail when he entered the contest. His high school, [Providence](#), is housed in the juvenile detention center in Oxnard, California. This distinction surely made Frank De La Torre 2011's entrant unique.

I coached Frank inside Providence thanks to a grant from the California Arts Council to the [Ventura County Arts Council](#). On my first day I met students mainly interested in free pizza, which was promised to anyone who competed. Most of them picked [Robert Frost's Fire and Ice](#) to memorize, taking the road most traveled—since that was the shortest poem in the anthology.

Can you really blame the kids in Providence for doubting their chances in Poetry Out Loud? For not seeing how entering the contest might do them any good? Frank was different. I saw this the moment I met him. He had memorized [The Ballad of Birmingham by Dudley Randall](#). Frank won the Providence contest handily and was furloughed so that he could compete in the Ventura County championship.

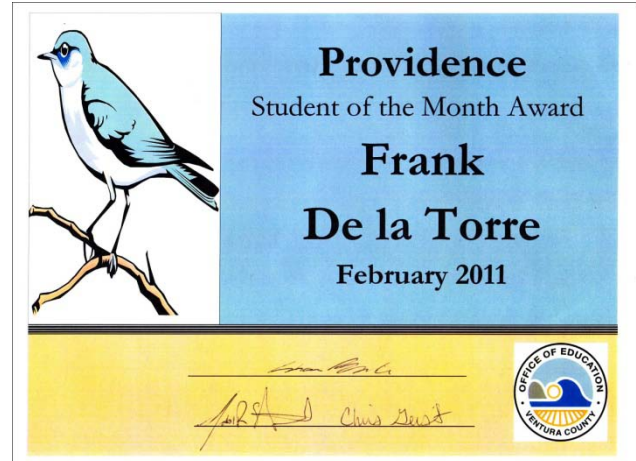


Several probation officers helped Frank, including picking out and purchasing a suit for

him to wear. The money came from the prison welfare fund. The officers shopped for him on their own time.

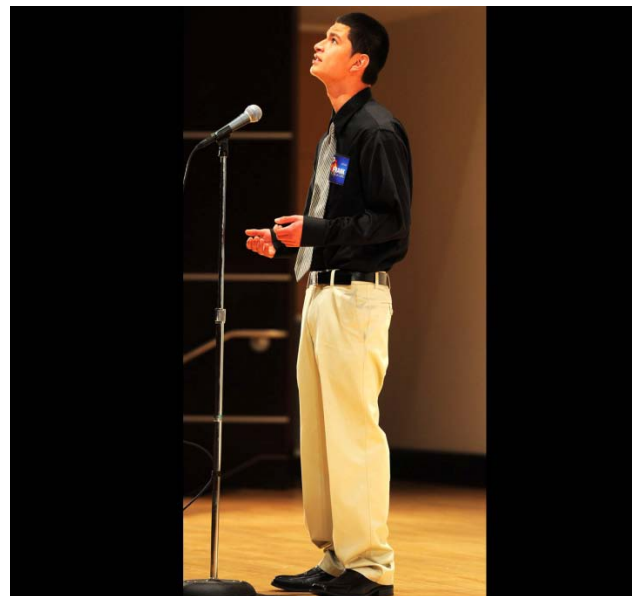
I've been inside several jails on different occasions—to visit a relative, to film a documentary and to teach workshops. The positive and genuine belief in rehabilitation present at the Oxnard facility overshadows anything I've experienced at other institutions. When Frank was transported from jail to where the contest was held and then released from his cuffs, a probation officer joked, "Don't try anything, I ran track in high school." Many of the men and women who work inside the juvenile hall and teach at Providence have seen

something better with his life. We should all root for that.



Frank over the years, through good times and certainly bad. Frank got in fights and was frequently in trouble. Frank has been down a difficult road. He served time for theft but he's a good person, he's talented and he wants to do

The Ballad of Birmingham refers to the church bombing in Alabama that killed four African-American girls during the Civil Rights Movement. Frank De La Torre has seen a lot of violence in his life and has experienced prejudice as well. His father died from injuries suffered while running from the police. Frank's mother was, for a time, addicted to drugs and unable to care for him. He was raised by his grandparents, but when his grandfather passed, Frank ended up being placed in group homes. He ran away from several of them.





california arts council
advancing california through the arts & creativity

Many of the county champions who traveled to Sacramento to compete in the State finals were valedictorians, class presidents and more. Frank De La Torre was two weeks removed from juvenile hall. I spoke with Diane Luby Lane, (one of the judges) who is Executive Director of a non-profit organization called [Get Lit - Words Ignite](#). Get Lit works with at-risk teens and uses poetry recitation to help students improve academically and personally. Diane has seen hundreds of kids perform poetry. She looks for something much deeper than memorization or clever interpretation. She wants to see the performer connect to the poem on a personal level. She wants her state of mind to be altered as an audience member. When Frank performed Ballad of Birmingham, he touched a nerve in all who saw him. He transformed the moment.



Frank made the first cut from 34 down to 18. While he was discouraged not to come away as the winner, he was able to appreciate what he had accomplished, especially given his circumstances. Janeva Scharf, a drama teacher at Providence who also coached Frank, noted that the boys in his dorm showed more respect for him after he won first prize in Ventura County. Students in Providence high school will definitely have more on their minds than free pizza the next time they consider entering the Poetry Out Loud contest. Everyone inside that facility knows the story of Frank De La Torre.

The [Ventura County Arts Council](#) hired Craig Rosen to coach Providence juvenile detention students and identify candidates for the Poetry Out Loud contest. The Ventura County Arts Council receives funding from the California Arts Council's, [Poetry Out Loud](#) program, which is managed by Kristin Margolis (kmargolis@cac.ca.gov). Craig first met Frank, while he was incarcerated, and recommended to the school's principal that Frank participate in Poetry Out Loud. After Frank's release from the juvenile facility, Craig coached Frank before the State Finals. Through Poetry Out Loud, Craig has been a mentor and a documentary filming partner to Frank De La Torre.

